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ABSTRACT

The role of institutional research is expanding and gaining in importance. Institutional research must fully examine and criticize the institution, including its purpose and values. Institutional research officers must concern themselves with academic and administrative functions and processes and participate actively in the planning and decisionmaking processes. The information provided by the institutional research officers must be selective, meaningful, bring about changes for improvement, and allow experimentation in solving existing and future problems of higher education, particularly the institution's role. (Author)

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AN OVERVIEW OF INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

by

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INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH - DEFINED

Institutional Research. What is it? What does it encompass? What should it be? What should it encompass?

Sidney Suslow, in a pamphlet called "A Declaration of Institutional Research," sets forth what fifteen conference participants at a conference held at Shakertown, Pleasant Hill, Kentucky in the Spring of 1971 consider to be the role of Institutional Research in today's complex environment of higher education.

"Institutional research is a special kind of educational research in colleges and universities focused on the institution, and its products are largely directed toward academic planning and administrative activities."[1]

Joe L. Saupe and James R. Montgomery, in a statement prepared for the Associate for Institutional Research called The Nature and Role of Institutional Research -- Memo to a College or University, published in 1970, cite several definitions. One definition reads:

> Institutional research involves the collection of data or the making of studies useful or necessary in (a) understanding and interpreting the institution; (b) making intelligent decisions about current operations or plans for the future; (c) improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the institution.[2]

Rourke and Brooks suggest that:

> Institutional research is a varigated form of organization self-study designed to help colleges and universities gather an expanding range of information about their own internal operations and the effectiveness with which they are using their resources.[3]

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[1]Sidney Suslow, A Declaration of Institutional Research, Esso Education Foundation and Association for Institutional Research, 1972.

[2]Paul L. Dressel, The Nature of Institutional Research, Michigan State University, Mimeographed 1966.

[3]Francis E. Rourke and Glen E. Brooks, The Managerial Revolution in Higher Education, (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1966), p. 44.

Another definition given by Dr. Brumbaugh is:

> Institutional research includes studies and investigations focused on current problems and issues in institutions of higher education. Also, studies and investigations of problems and issues that are basic to long-range planning or that may ultimately have implications for institutional operations.[4]

William Fuller of the University of the State of New York, in a paper entitled "Implications for Institutional Research in the Planning of Intra-University Facilities" discussed at an A.I.R. Conference in 1966 says, "Institutional research is the search for intimate knowledge of all elements which make up an institution of higher education -- students, faculty, curriculum, facilities, and finance, which may then be used to assist the administration in making decisions that affect the institution."[5]

My definition of institutional research is: "Institutional research is research done within the institution to focus on current and future problems of higher education within an institution. This office collects data in connection with these problems, interprets and evaluates the data so that intelligent decisions can be made about current operations and planning for the future to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the institution.

PURPOSE

Is the basic purpose of institutional research to probe deeply into the workings of an institution for evidence of weakness or flaws which interfere with the attainment of its purposes and utilize an undue amount

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[4]A. J. Brumbaugh, Research Designed to Improve Institutions of Higher Learning, (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1960), p. 2.

[5]William Fuller, Implications for Institutional Research in the Planning of Intra-University Facilities, Research on Academic Input, Association for Institutional Research, 1966.

of resources, as Paul Dressel suggests, or does the purpose of institutional research go beyond that negative concept?

Institutional research should discover the strengths of a college or university as well as its flaws and weaknesses, in my opinion. This is not meant to demean the need of self-study and the discovery of flaws, but rather to strengthen the role of institutional research. To strengthen my argument, I did some research and found at least one notable Institutional Research Officer who agrees with me.

Institutional research too often forces the study of institutions which are in trouble or departments of institutions which are in trouble, Dr. Richard Perry of the University of Toledo stated in an address, "Institutional Research: Vital Force in Higher Education." This approach is like studying the mentally ill - valuable, but insufficient.

Perhaps institutional research, Dr. Perry states, ought to concentrate on institutions which are outstanding, successful, unique and self-actualized. Institutional research should research those students who are not problems but who are positive contributors to the university or college, its programs and ultimately society.[6]

Of primary importance to the work of institutional research must be its ability to identify, describe and articulate the creative quality of educational programs, Dr. Richard Perry states.

Institutional research encompasses an appraisal of all of the efforts of higher education including possibly its impact, not only on the student and faculty, but also on the community and nation. Perhaps even higher education's impact internationally.

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[6]Richard R. Perry, Institutional Research: Vital Force in Higher Education, Association for Institutional Research, 1972.

The ultimate goal of institutional research NEBEH says, "is to base policy decisions on reliable information about the institution itself."[7]

Dr. Robert Parden of the University of Santa Clara at the A.I.R. Conference in 1971 appeals for an expanded role for institutional research beyond traditional boundaries. He suggested that planning, research, allocation and evaluation functions are all interrelated. Each is oriented towards the optimum use of institutional resources in the satisfaction of institutional goals. Dr. Parden argues for coordination of these functions instead of the segmented approach presently.[8] If I understand his article, it is that the office of institutional research coordinate comprehensive institutional planning.

Dr. Warren B. Martin, Provost of Sonoma State College at the California Association for Institutional Research Forum held in San Francisco in the Spring of 1973 suggested an even broader role for institutional research. For example, he implored institutional research to employ their resources in fight against academic anarchy; to move into research on major considerations in the field of higher education, not the traditional studies (nuts and bolts he called them). Dr. Martin asked institutional researchers to become active in formulating institutional policy decisions. "To have a purchase on date, to become academic statesmen." He suggested that research on faculty and administrators is sorely needed. The faculty needs reorientation, Dr. Martin said.

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[7]Francis P. Horn, A University President Looks at Institutional Research, Office of Institutional Studies, University of Wisconsin, 1963.

[8]R. J. Parden, An Expanded Role for Institutional Research, Association for Institutional Research, 1971.

Dr. Alfred Cavanaugh, of the University of California at Berkley, cites several specific roles to make fiscal policy development more meaningful. He suggests the improvement of budget processes, and the need to reconcile positive central fiscal control with flexibility and adaptiveness at the departmental level. Universities and colleges need a better understanding of the future costs of academic programs (both new ones and the expansion of old ones.)[9]

In evaluating the purpose of institutional research as a result of the above comments, I would conclude that the purpose depends on the needs of the institution in light of current problems and future problems and that the purpose of institutional research is dynamic and subject to change.

The purpose of institutional research, as I view it, is to discover the strengths and weaknesses of the institution but also to appraise all of the efforts of the institution in attempting to find solutions to problems in higher education including operations and planning.

[9]Alfred Cavanaugh, Administrative Policy Formulation, The Role of Institutional Research, Association for Institutional Research, 1971.

INFORMATION NEEDS

The methods of measuring and evaluating effectiveness of the various programs of a college or university is a formidable task. Some of the information needs that institutional research addresses itself to are:

1. Information about students concerning the progress and attainment of students.
    a. characteristics and attributes
    b. admissions
    c. grades
    d. evaluating success of graduates
2. Information concerning the faculty.
    a. biographical
    b. faculty load
    c. tenure
    d. rank
    e. degrees
3. Information concerning courses and degrees.
    a. student credit hours
    b. course inventory
    c. class size
4. Finance
    a. budget
    b. expenditures
    c. unit costs

While statistics concerning faculty load are interesting, for example, do we in institutional research endeavor to make the statistics have meaning in terms of the nature of the load, subjects taught and of the interests

and capabilities of the faculty member. Do we make any comparisons between other departments which really have meaning.

Dr. Francis Horn, in a talk "A University President Looks at Research" suggests several criteria to evaluate the results of institutional research which I would like to cite.

1. What suggestions does the office of institutional research have for more effective utilization of physical facilities by re-design of existing space or by better control of class schedules?

2. Do the results of institutional research convince the faculty or other members of the institution of the justification for changes? Faculty members are not immune to the argument of factual evidence.

3. Institutional research is necessary for no other reason than to fill out the multitude of questionnaires. How effective are institutional researchers in that role?

4. Institutional research needs to suggest reasons for the situation or make recommendations for improvement. The nature of the load, the subjects taught, for example, and how change can occur.

5. More meaningful salary data is needed. For example, supplemental institutional income for extra teaching, research, and other activities.

6. More evaluation is needed of the results of the institution's educational efforts: of the success, attitudes, and non-occupational activities of graduates, including records of baccalaureate graduates in graduate and post-baccalaureate graduate education. An evaluation of student achievement, of curriculum.

7. There exists a need in institutional research to give attention to experimentation.[10]

Information supplied by offices of institutional research is essential to academic life. Dr. William C. McInnes, President of the University of San Francisco cited seven points in The California Association for Institution Research in 1973.

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[10]Francis P. Horn, A University President Looks at Institutional Research, Office of Institutional Studies, University of Wisconsin, 1963.

1. Information is needed by the faculty as well as the administration. What is needed today is a much freer flow of information.

2. Information is only one ingredient in planning and administration. Many factors affect planning and decision making. Information is not the same as making decisions.

3. Information costs money and administrators are becoming sensitive to the costs of information.

4. People want to share in the solutions of problems.

5. Institutional research is a participant in the university as well as an information gathering service. It should not only be recording history but also making it.

6. The more sophisticated the information supplied, the more difficult it is to use.

7. Institutional research has never developed any substantive qualifications or standards. There has been little self-analysis.

Reverend McInnes suggests that institutional research officers be more selective in the information they present. They presently supply too much. Institutional research needs to be more sensitive to the needs of the institution. The information ought to be proportionate to the needs and capacities of the university. It should provide for vest pocket research. Dr. McInnes suggests that common sets of data need to be developed. Finally, he suggests that institutional research needs to focus on the patterns and structures of change.

CONCLUSION

The role of institutional research is expanding and gaining in importance. Institutional research, Sidney Suslow indicates, must not become an array of routine, periodic or special tasks unrelated to any fundamental concern with the purpose and quality of higher education. Institutional research must fully examine and criticize the institution, including its

purpose and values.[11]

As institutional research officers we must concern ourselves with academic and administrative functions and processes and participate actively in the planning and decision making processes. Our information must be selective, meaningful, bring about changes for improvement and provide for experimentation in solving existing and future problems of higher education, particularly the institution's role. Creativity and innovation should be our trait.

Our destinies are ours. We can become one of the most vital components of the institution and the educational process through our objectivity and innovation in research, or we can forfeit our role to others. Institutional research has an important role to play in higher education. Let's play that role to the fullest.

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[11] Sidney Suslow, A Declaration on Institutional Research, Esso Education Foundation and Association for Institutional Research, 1972.

SOURCES FOR HELP

Institutional Researchers at other colleges and universities

Association for Institutional Research publications and conferences

Association for Institutional Research Regional Conferences

Institutional Research in the University: A Handbook, by Paul A. Dressel and Associates, Jossey-Boxx, June 1971

Educational Record - American Council on Education, One Dupont Circle, Washington, D.C. 20036

Chronical of Higher Education, 1717 Mass. Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036

College and University Business, McGraw-Hill, 230 West Monroe Street, Chicago, Illinois 60606

National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) at W.I.C.H.E., P.O. Drawer P, Boulder, Colorado